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Revisiting Intercultural Adjustment Training - Germans in the United States

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Introduction

In the years 2000 and 2001, I examined four groups of first generation German immigrants and expatriates to the United States in the San Francisco Bay area. German immigrants are the fifth largest immigrant group in the US and comprise the largest documented number of immigrants since 1820 (INS report, 1999).

The aim was to provide insight where previous research (Church, 1982; Isajiw, 1998) on acculturation proved contradictory. Qualitative data was needed to support differentiated aspects that research from surveys and questionnaires could not address.

Thus, through group interviews with German born immigrants and sojourners in Group 1 (residence of one to four years), Groups 2 and 4 (residence in the United States from four to eight years) and Group 3 (residence from eleven to twenty years), it was possible to come to conclusive results. The findings of the study provided the basis for my proposal that intercultural adjustment training be inductive, the U-curve and other models used precautiously.

Whereas many of the acculturation models and literature have heavily relied on questionnaires and surveys (Church, 1982), the method of discourse analysis of mono- and bilingual conversations provided a forum for the exchange of complex experiences of the German immigrants.

Concepts such as assimilation and adjustment (Lysgaard, 1954; Oberg, 1979) are far more complex than suggested in the U-curve model, for example, which is used in much training. The notions of “multicultural man” (Adler, 1982) and “intercultural being” (Kim and Ruben, 1988) create a harmonious ideal in a fictitious reality and do not account for phenomena of everyday social interaction and power differences.

Following more critical work on processes of acculturation (De Fina, 1999; Hedge, 1996), this study used qualitative data to obtain an insight into the cultural identity formation in the immigrants. In short, the analysis of discourse made it possible to capture the complexity of the immigrants’ construction of who they are becoming in the different cultural context.

Findings

Some of the findings will be briefly discussed as they provide the grounds for our intercultural adjustment training.

- the immigrants’ simultaneous use of their two languages in the same discourse was a reflection of their hybrid identities,
- the group with 10 to 20 years residence was the most critical about their lives in the United States and the least critical about Germany,
- the group with 1-5 years residence created the most positive self-image in the American societal context and was the most critical about other Germans and Germany,
- the analysis of all groups but the one with the shortest length of residence proved that the German immigrants are co-creating and reinventing their cultural identities in everyday social interaction and in the examined discourses. For example, one group negotiated a new generational and intercultural German identity with members who are “open-minded”, “travel”, and “get rid of the old patterns” they inherited from their cultural ancestors. Thus, in social interaction, the German immigrants are creating a new hybrid space for their cultural belonging. This process is fluid, constantly changing and therefore gives a different view on acculturation literature.

Application to Intercultural Training

In our intercultural trainings at “HOPIKOS” (“Hochschulübergreifendes Projekt zur Förderung der interkulturellen Kompetenz von Studierenden”), half of our trainees consist of foreigners and the other half of Germans students. The application of the previous study suggests that we do not present the curve model giving prescriptive methods of how to reduce culture shock, etc. In fact, Kealey’s (1989) study has suggested that those experiencing culture shock the most developed the most cross-cultural effectiveness. Rather, we developed a method in which the trainees draw curves of their own transitional experiences or sojourns abroad. The students then work in groups and discuss their curves. Finally, a number of volunteer students introduce their curves and we then elicit strategies for coping with challenges from the whole group. The trainers write down the challenge at hand on a white board and add alongside them strategies for dealing with the situation as in the following.

Challenges	Strategies
Feeling overwhelmed at the university	Ask other students, ask a lot of questions
Feeling homesick	Make new friends, create comfortable home where you live, call friends and family, if possible don’t go home right then
Etc.	Etc.

This method has proven to be very fruitful, as the trainees often provide excellent ideas.

Depending on the time available, we then introduce some of the acculturation research (Berry, Kim & Bosky, 1987) to provide a theoretical background. This combination of different approaches to intercultural adjustment training seems more holistic, as it includes real lived experiences from the students.

This is relevant because the the discussion above and other studies (Church, 1982; Kealey, 1989; De Fina, 1999; Hedge, 1996) and data have shown that the models are inconclusive and do not account for the complexity and fluidity of acculturation in social interaction.